The Importance of Diversity

I am from Hickory, North Carolina. I go to a small, conservative, Christian school that is 99% white. The political and religious views of the students are as homogenous as their skin color. Growing up surrounded constantly by the same kind of people was something that I never really noticed until high school. When I did realize it, I resented it, but didn’t really think I could do much about it. It wasn’t until I participated in a TASP that I realized just how crucial having a diverse group of students is in ensuring fruitful discussion and real debate.

I had grown up under the impression that what we should strive for as a society is to become “color blind”, to act like race is insignificant and does not matter. I took this mindset with me to TASP and soon realized just how wrong I was. Prejudices are alive and well within American culture, and turning a blind eye to the problem only perpetuates the situation. The only way to get it out of the system is to address prejudices directly and to have more diversity in every realm of life. This might seem like a banal concept, but at TASP it became very real and immediately significant.

Early on in the program, one of the girls said that it was a struggle being black in America. Initially I disagreed, and told her so. I based my reasoning on the fact that very few people these days are openly racist, and therefore racism is no longer an issue. What I learned at TASP, through both statistics and anecdotal evidence, is that prejudices and micro-aggressions are very real obstacles that minorities still have to overcome in America.

Coming to TASP, where only 14 out of the 32 participants were white, was an incredible experience in learning about new cultures and interacting with people from them. It was fascinating to share stories and learn about the ways in which we are similar and to discuss the cultural norms that we thought were strange. Whether it was learning about growing up in the ghetto of Jersey City, or explaining the difference between country and folk music, we all had something to learn and to share.

But skin color was not the only thing that made us unique. We all came from different parts of the country, and a few of the kids came from China, South Korea, and Guam. Our political views differed, our social backgrounds varied, and we each had something unique to bring to the conversation. There were strong liberals and staunch conservatives, Catholics and atheists. We were all able to come together and discuss our ideas in a completely open manner.

I’ve grown up in a school setting with one dominating worldview and class background, and the discussion in such a setting comes nowhere near to the passion and knowledge that takes place in a diverse environment. Teachers at my school attempt to play the “devil’s advocate”, but it is nothing like a true debate in which both sides of the argument firmly believe in what they are arguing. There is a whole new dynamic when the person you are debating doesn’t share the same foundational worldview as you. I had never really been exposed to this concept until TASP. I am so glad that I was exposed to it though; it broadened my perspective and forced me to consider many new and fascinating ideas.

During this experience, I learned a lot about myself, and wondered if I had any of my own prejudices. Although I didn’t have any negative feelings toward people from different backgrounds, I see now that I might have been assuming too much on the part of white people. I think that I viewed all white people as open minded and without any kind of racist tendencies. That’s the ideal, but it is nowhere near the reality. Because of TASP, I am much better able to understand the struggle that minorities go through. I hope to better their situation in any way that I can, specifically through tutoring or community service.

Diversity is often hailed as a great part of academic life. But it became real and valuable to me during my summer at TASP. I learned a lot about myself, race, and the world because of the incredibly different backgrounds that each of the TASPers came from. The diverse environment at TASP truly changed my life in that it showed me just how important it is to learn from all different kinds of people and to recognize and embrace what makes us unique.